

## The Messiah on Netflix: Between Confusion and Inspiration

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### Abstract

The Netflix series *The Messiah* has intrigued many spectators but has encountered criticism as well. The criticism is heterogeneous: both concerned Christians, often from American protestant background, as well as sceptic secular people have rejected person and message of the mysterious al-Masih. In our article it is shown that this kind of criticism should be considered part and parcel of the Messianic impact of the series. By a careful comparison between Islamic and Christian Messianic motifs it becomes clear that the series has consciously found its way amidst a plethora of motifs, hereby avoiding violent and intolerant elements of classical Messianism, although apocalyptic elements are not lacking either. The device exploited frequently is 'the rhetorics of evasion and of confrontation', by which the search for truth falls back upon the follower him- or herself. Human existence is viewed as a struggle between the superficial and the existential, as well as between the self-assured and the wounded. Al-Masih seems to be capable of confronting the people with the deeper layers of their existence, while transcending barriers of religion, politics and class.

### Introduction

When it comes to religion and film, two genres have been popular for scholarly analysis. One is the well-known genre of Jesus films, almost as old as the medium of film itself. Some Jesus films leave no doubt as to the question who is Jesus: fair haired, blue eyes, dressed in white, often standing alone, in marked contrast with the dark haired apostles, often together in a group. Jesus films may differ regarding the miraculous as well. The emphasis on the supernatural can be strong, sometimes even stronger than in the gospels themselves: Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* from 2004 is a good example of that, drawing as it does upon German romanticism and ecstatic visions of Anna Catharina of Emmerich. Other films show no physiological differences between Jesus and the apostles and do not emphasize the miraculous, but rather the revolutionary ethics (Dennis Potter's *Son of man*, 1969; Pasolini, *Evangeliogegen Mateo*, 1964). Curiously, the last mentioned film has been received as 'marxist', although the script play followed the gospel nearly word by word.

The second genre of religious films focuses on a Messianic figure as well, but more implicitly, as an archetype of the hero who sacrifices himself on behalf of mankind: *The Terminator* (1984), and Frodo in *The Lord of the Rings* (2001-2003). One might object to the latter as an example of an archetypal sacrifice, for Frodo manages to stay alive whereas it is Smeagol / Gollum disappears into the deep, but against his will. Still, Frodo does not return home and becomes the only hobbit to remain celibate, journeying to the West soon afterwards. (See for more examples of sacrificing heroes <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eGhDf0fgMnU>).

With *The Messiah*, written by Michael Petroni in ten episodes, we find ourselves in between these two genres: we don't know whether the protagonist is Jesus, some Islamic Messianic figure or an impostor, although the Jesus films have undoubtedly strongly influenced both appearance and behavior of this 'Messiah'. The hero *al-Masih* is played by Mehdi Dehbi, a gifted Tunisian Belgian actor and dancer, whose earlier role in *Les Justes* by

Albert Camus made him famous. Incidentally, the topic of this play: how to maintain one's purity while being involved in a terrorist attack upon the tsar shows some similarity with The Messiah, whose pure intentions are not believed. We may wonder whether al-Masih would be prepared to sacrifice himself, although his immense efforts to help people at places of our globe widely apart strongly suggest so. The appearance of *al-Masih* (Arabic for Messiah) is classical in the sense that his hair and physiognomy clearly distinguishes him from his followers, although his appearance is rather oriental than 'Westernized'.

It is clear that The Messiah fits also into the genre of *the return of Christ while both church and society are unprepared for it*. Evangelical Christians implicitly confirm this genre by complaining that the film The Messiah is not "family friendly", without reflecting how "family friendly" Jesus himself was: "Whoever does not hate his own father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters and even himself..." (Luke 14:26). The most famous example is the Grand Inquisitor in Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*, who begs a silent Christ to stay away, but there are many more (Weijtens 1936; also Gielen 1931). The embarrassment caused by the confrontation with the messiah, especially amongst the high authorities of church and state, is fully exploited in our film.

Let us take a look at the script. The Australian writer Michael Petroni has a record of semi-religious productions, (Narnia, *Till Human Voices Wake Us*, about a reincarnated beloved), as well as science fiction and horror productions, which may have prepared him well for doing the job of writing *The Messiah*. There are ten episodes: it seems that the hoped for next series will not materialize. It is not our purpose to deal with the whole film, for this article has no intention to replace the film. Analyzing the first three episodes and the final enables us to follow the beginnings and the end of the story and the main characters. By doing so we will clarify the fascination of the figure of al-Masih whose impact upon many people has transcended categories of esthetics and entertainment?

After each episode we will provide some commentary.

### **1. First episode: "He that has an ear".**

"Whoever has ears let him hear", (Matthew 13:9), this Biblical motto adhorting people to really understand Jesus' teaching, forms the heading of the first episode. We see a preacher dressed in a yellow robe addressing people in the city of Damascus, Syria. He reassures the crowd that it is not God's will that the city be captured by the terrorist Islamic State. A sandstorm of one month prevents Islamic State to capture the city. This surprisingly political beginning is even heightened when the main character leaves for the Golan Heights, a bone of contention between Israel and Syria for decades. He is joined in the desert by hundreds of followers who call him al-Masih, a word consisting of the same roots as the Hebrew *Mashiah*, from which the English word Messiah has been derived. Like Jesus who rejected to be called 'good master' (Mark 10:8), our hero rejects to be called imam, referring to God instead, while quoting the *Qur'an*. A young boy named Jibril (Gabriel), who has lost his mother in the war, firmly believes in the Messiah's honesty and will reappear in later episodes. The Messiah asks his followers, to their astonishment, to do away with all weapons. From the mountains he looks over the land and the Dead Sea, just like Moses, but unlike Moses he enters the land by crossing the barbed fence. Israeli soldiers are utterly confused by the unarmed crowd and take the Messiah prisoner. There he meets the second protagonist of the series: Aviram Dahan (played by Tomer Sisley, an Israeli-French actor, known as a comedian). Dahan is a member of the Israeli secret police Shin Bet. In the 'hard-boiled' interrogation it turns out that al-Masih knows many facts about Aviram that he is not supposed to know, including his name and a traumatic event with a boy in Megiddo, of which

nothing is disclosed thus far. The next morning Dahan discovers that al-Masih has disappeared. He is suspected of having helped him to flee.

*In the meantime we meet Eva Geller (played by Michelle Monaghan).<sup>1</sup> Eva Geller is an American CIA agent who speaks Hebrew. She has lost her husband and suffers herself from some undisclosed illness, probably cancer. She has a somewhat strained relationship with her concerned father. While in the USA she watches the Messiah by satellite and later on she will track him down in the Middle East.*

This episode displays what will turn out to be a regular pattern: a confrontation between a skeptical hardliner, politically oriented and non-religious, but under the surface hiding trauma and human loneliness, and the mysterious Messianic figure who unveils that hiddenness. We may have the impression that this Dahan hides his own insecurity by overacting as a powerful secret agent. His marriage has ended and he is unable to give proper attention to his little daughter whom he loves. This hiding of human shortage will be recurring pattern. The fact that al-Masih knows not only the name of his interrogator, but also his secret traumas strongly contribute to undermining a skeptical defense. It reminds of Jesus having seen Natanael under the fig tree even before the two had met (John 1:48). In our case the hasidic story of a Jew being taken prison may have served as a model. The guard, apparently conversant with the Bible, mocks the Jewish belief by questioning why God asks: “Adam, where are you?” (Gen 3:9), if God knows everything. The Jew answers that God asks every human being in every generation where he is in God’s world. “And look at yourself: you are 46 years old. Where are you now?” The man trembled for he was 46 years old...”

The story is told by Shneur Zalman, the Lubavitcher Rebbe (*Once upon a Chassid*, 1994).

In addition, some classical Messianic traits have been exploited: leading people in the wilderness like a second Moses (Josephus, *The Jewish War* 2:13,4-5); collecting followers like Jesus himself and like other Messianic figures (Acts of the Apostles 5:36). Escaping from prison is what Peter and his followers do in the same chapter of Acts. Incidentally, the main character does not claim to be the Messiah, although followers may think so. In that respect the similarity with Jesus’ enigmatic dealing with his own identity is striking: “Who do you say I am?” (Matthew 16:15). Even the praise from the audience receives a stern rebuttal, reminding the people of their own destiny:

“As Jesus was saying these things, a woman in the crowd raised her voice: “Blessed is the womb that bore You, and blessed are the breasts that nursed You! But He replied: “Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and obey it.” (Luke 11:27). Whereas the woman intended to recognize and praise Jesus, the answer is, bluntly spoken, that she should scrutinize her own life. Instead of demanding recognition of religious authority Jesus confronts the people with their own behavior. Undoubtedly, this aspect of Jesus’ teaching has remained largely obscured in ecclesiastical teaching and theological reflection, more intent on affirming solid truth than accepting evading ambiguities. Something similar happens between al-Masih and his followers. Sitting round a fire in the desert Al-Masih quotes C.S. Lewis:

“If you search for truth you may find comfort,  
But if you look for comfort you will never find the truth”.

A Muslim present objects to this quote from an “infidel”. Incidentally, a surprising erudition for a fundamentalist Muslim, but let us not forget that the writer of *The Messiah* Michael

<sup>1</sup> See for the complete cast <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt7671598/fullcredits>



Petroni produced Narnia as well, after the story by the same C.S. Lewis! This objection enrages al-Masih. “You mean those who follow Islam”, the Muslim continues, whereupon al-Masih: “Don’t tell me what I mean”. The simultaneous identification with and distancing from a given religion and its Messianic outlook is greatly enhanced by the fact that al-Masih speaks three languages: Hebrew, Arabic and English. In his encounters he both identifies with his interlocutor (avoiding a facile ‘New Age’ superiority) and transcends him / her. We find here the same rhetoric of ‘evading by confronting’ as in the gospel quoted above. The incompatibility of the expectations of the people and the Messianic rejoinders creates a permanent tension which can be summarized under what we have called: *The return of Christ while both church and society are unprepared for it*. In this case the context has shifted to Islam: the Muslims following al-Masih cannot understand him, due to their traditional and one-sided knowledge of Islam. This peculiar form of wisdom by returning questions and confronting the audience is hardly thought through in theology. The dialogical confrontational genre shows some affinities, however, with the Cynical school in Antiquity, the Desert Fathers and Mothers in Early Christianity and with Sufism in Islam. (Poorthuis, to be published)

The boy Gabriel functions like a kind of forerunner of al-Masih like the angel Gabriel who announces Jesus’ birth and communicates divine revelation.



The choice of the Golan Heights, Syriac territory occupied by Israel, indicates that our Messianic figure cannot easily be suspected of a political one-sidedness. He confronts both the Syriac military and the Israeli border control, suggesting liberation of exiled Palestinians by leading them back into their homeland. He does so by crossing the border in a peaceful way. It is precisely this non-violent behavior without food and water which upsets the Israeli border police most and which compromises the USA as supporters of Israel. The Israeli soldiers would only regain their confidence once someone of the followers would grab a weapon.

The name of Eva may allude to an unredeemed existence as Eva / Eve, the first woman, has been banished from paradise. A full explanation will have to wait however.

## **2. Second episode: Tremor**

*The heading 'tremor' may refer to the astonishment of the crowd when being confronted with the miraculous. 'Tremor' can also be associated with catastrophes which accompany the coming of the Messiah, like tremors of the earth. In the film, the tremor may also refer to a new group of people, a family in the country of the USA. The daughter has epileptic fits which induces visions of a religious nature, possibly premonitions of impending disaster. Her father is a protestant minister, in big financial troubles over his church; her mother is addicted to alcohol. They misunderstand their daughter, suspecting her of using drugs. Only in the third episode this new focus becomes clear. The attention now shifts to Israel again.*

*The people in the desert have drawn international attention, to the dismay of both Israel and the USA. The followers discover that al-Masih has escaped from prison, which greatly enhances their hope. Eva Geller helps the Israelis to find al-Masih. To their surprise he pops up at the most central religious place: the Temple Mount / Haram al-Sharif in Jerusalem. Standing before the Dome of the Rock, an Islamic shrine on the Temple Mount, he speaks to the people announcing the 'end of history'. The police enter the Temple Mount to take him prisoner, but then a boy is hit by a bullet. When he lays his hands on the boy, the boy stands up unharmed. The people present find a bloody bullet. Whereas the crowd believes in a miracle, the secret service considers it a magical trick. Meanwhile Al-Masih has disappeared.*



The central theme in this episode is credibility. One cannot avoid having an opinion about this figure. This only enhances his Messianic status; ambiguous responses from the people are an essential element of Jesus' preaching. Even more, when the people remain suspicious



it turns out that Jesus is unable to perform miracles (Mark 6:5-6). On the other hand, when the followers of John the Baptist inquire about Jesus' identity, Jesus answers, without stating explicitly his Messianic identity, by pointing to the effects of his doings: "lame people walk, blind people regain their sight" (Matthew 11:5), an obvious reference to the prophecy of Isaiah 29:18). The importance of Jesus' miracles is a point of debate among theologians: whereas some hold that the religious teaching has been the central element of Jesus' performance, others point to the supernatural as what convinced the audience. (Morton Smith 1978). However, being a magician could also be interpreted as fraudulent or as using black magic. The Jewish polemical document the *Toledoth Jeshu* made ample use of pagan ridicule of Christianity, supplying in addition Jewish magical topics.<sup>2</sup> It concedes that Jesus could heal people with the secret Name of God. Although it was considered impossible to smuggle the Name out of the Holy of Holies without being killed, it was told that Jesus had succeeded by hiding a parchment with that Name in his body after inflicting a wound on his leg.

Although this kind of calumny arose centuries after Jesus, it proves that the issue of legitimacy and of the genuineness of the miracles continued to haunt the masses. Evangelical rejection of al-Masih fails to acknowledge this. Claiming instead an unambiguous identity of Jesus as Messiah and rejecting any similarity with other persons in advance. The accusation of magic tricks and illusions will increase during the film. Indeed, the ambiguity concerns not only al-Masih

The ambiguity of al-Masih and of the responses he evokes, not only in the film, but also among the people watching the film, also explains the confusion that arose in Islamic circles. The government of Jordan had initially allowed the crew to shoot the film there, but later on asked Netflix to block the film from their national broadcasting, fearing religious upheaval. It was felt that this al-Masih could be no other than *Al-Masih al-Dajjal*, the impostor-Messiah, who is supposed to precede the real Messiah before the End of Times, leading the people astray by imitating Messianic deeds and by entering Jerusalem, after which he will be defeated by Jesus. This is, however, not an exclusively Islamic issue: there is an intrinsic connection between this Islamic figure *Al-Masih al-Dajjal* and the Christian notion of the Antichrist, known from 2 Thessalonians 2:3-12 and from several apocalyptic and patristic documents afterwards. (Bousset and Keane, 2003). Precisely because of the close similarity between the Antichrist and the returning Christ, the apocalyptic tension becomes nearly unbearable, for the phenomena which accompany the inauguration of the Messianic times are in both cases highly identical, be they miracles or catastrophes. Hence we have two forms of rejection of al-Masih, one by modern sceptics, another by informed religious leaders who consider him the Antichrist using magic. The theme of the returning Messiah receives a sharp edge: established religion rejects the returning Messiah and brands him as the Antichrist, because *they don't want their Messiah returned*. For Christians al-Masih is the Antichrist because he is too Islamic: the real Messiah should finish all unbelievers, according to their eschatology. For Muslims he is the Antichrist because he is too Christian or even Jewish: the real Masih is supposed to break all crosses on the churches.

Then there is modern skepticism. This modern skepticism does not only concern al-Masih: the CIA agent Eva Geller exclaims: "*What was Jesus after all? A populist politician with an axe to grind against the Roman Empire.*"

In spite of all this skepticism, until now al-Masih has mainly confronted his followers with themselves instead of claiming supreme religious authority. It would be worthwhile to search in the film for references to the elaborate Islamic Messianic and apocalyptic traditions. One example may suffice in which Jesus (Isa) is described as defeating the Antichrist:

“Allah will send al-Masih, son of Mary, who will descend from heaven to the white minaret on the east side of Damascus, wearing two saffron-colored garments...” (Muslim, *Sahih* 4: 2253; Filiu, 17). It should not surprise us that in the film al-Masih starts his career in Damascus wearing a yellow robe...

Although in traditional Islamic sources al-Masih is an arch-enemy of the Jews, especially if they remain unconverted to Islam, our al-Masih rather demonstrates impartiality both in identity and in his interventions of conflicts, this in site of protests from Islamic side that the film would be anti-Muslim. Incidentally, Christian dispensationalist theories show a remarkable similarity with these Islamic traditions, including the catastrophic killing of unconverted Jews at the End of Times, who then will not be saved by the ‘rapture’. In the next episode the confrontation with American protestant Christianity takes a central place. Again the response is nothing less but surprising and unsettling.

### 3. *Third episode: The finger of God*

The motto: “The finger of God” refers to a Biblical expression indicating God’s direct interference with human affairs.

[Picture of church left unharmed in tornado, third episode, 11.50]

*The stage has shifted to a little town in Texas, from which a glimpse of it was already shown in the previous episode. This shift may baffle the unprepared spectator, but the significance of it grasps deeply. The anti-Islamic sentiment among evangelical Protestants in the USA – a country which has even denied access to Muslims from abroad- is extremely strong and outspoken. Islam is associated with the Antichrist rather than with a Messianic figure, who even resembles Jesus Christ, but speaks Arabic as well. Still, the reverend in the small village recognizes a Messianic figure in al-Masih, who even prevents him from setting fire to the church in an attempt to get rid of all his troubles. Impending disaster materializes in a tornado destroying the village, except for a small church in which the Mexican pastor Felix Iguero (played by John Ortiz) serves. His daughter Rebecca (played by Stefania LaVie Owen), who had foresights of the tornado, as we have seen, is now rescued by al-Masih. Inexplicably he has made his way from the Middle East to Texas. Whether he is a double, or he has arranged a private flight, remains mysterious. He is the guest of the reverend, but is taken prison. Interrogated by Eva Geller he again knows her name and of her hidden pain (she had four miscarriages) and her attempt to forget all that by hard work. In marked contrast with Eva, her father openly confesses to be impressed by al-Masih. The reverend manages to get al-Masih released from prison.*

*In a later episode al-Masih persuades the pastor to leave everything behind to join him to Washington. The pastor’s wife is adamantly opposed to it, but the daughter, who had already a special communication with al-Masih is delighted.*

The uprooting of social ties by inviting people to join him to Washington has provoked strong criticism. This Messianic figure can hardly be called “family-friendly”, evangelicals protest. They obviously ignore that Jesus’ call of his disciples cannot be answered otherwise than by uprooting social ties. Again the difference between established Christianity and the original Messianic message, already exploited in the Grand Inquisitor, plays a role again. The disciples not only leave their nets and their parents behind, saint Peter must even have been married, for he had a mother-in-law (Luke 4:38). A socially acceptable American-Christian behavior, perhaps even to be considered ‘bourgeois’, squarely differs from the life style of Jesus and his disciples as wandering preachers, trusting to be supported for food and drinks by the people they visit.

The ambiguity of Messianic encounter can also be explained by pointing to the broken relationships. The encounter induces people to work at forgiveness and reconciliation. This holds good for Eva’s relationship with her father, the reverend’s relationship with his daughter and Aviram’s relationship with his ex-wife and his daughter. All these relationships are affected by the encounter with the Messiah which provokes not only gratitude but also resistance. One is reminded of the enigmatic Talmudic dictum: “let the Messiah come, but I do not wish to see him” (*Babylonian Talmud* Sanhedrin 98b, Poorthuis 1992, 98-110). One explanation reminds of the ‘birthpangs’, the catastrophes and tribulations introducing the Messianic time, which makes the wish to be spared that experience understandable. However, another interpretation points to the obligation to forgive and to the grace of divine forgiveness for even the most serious crimes. Not wishing to witness such pardoning of crimes is all too human! In our film, the resistance against the Messiah is often rooted in an unwillingness to mend one’s own broken relationships.

The news of the miraculous rescue of the little church has been broadcasted with the result that thousands of Americans, eager to receive spiritual guidance or just ‘spiritual tourists’, have become followers of al-Masih. The ensuing march to Washington cannot but upset the authorities, the politicians and the Osecurity. The arrival in Washington is a strong reminder of Martin Luther King’s march to Washington, including its Messianic overtones of liberation and reconciliation. The sermons are delivered at the same place, near the Lincoln Memorial Reflecting Pool. After his sermon al-Masih walks on water. A private conversation with the president reveals the personal sorrows of the POTUS.

The continuation of the episodes shows a marked difference between a film and a series. Whereas a film will take care to work towards a proper ending, a series, especially one with a limited number of episodes develops all kinds of new narrative strands, some of which appear by hindsight to be superfluous. Especially the ending of a series is widely different from that of a movie, even more in the case of uncertainty whether the series will be continued. The spectator has accustomed himself to the phenomenon of a cliffhanger, meant to persuade the financial and organizing team to continue the series. Hence instead of an atmosphere of reconciliation and clarification, which generally marks the end of a film or a story (or book) and what Aristotle calls a ‘catharsis’, instead the series reaches its peak. The Messiah is no exception to that as we will see in the tenth and last episode.

#### ***4. Tenth episode: the wages of sin.***

The motto ‘the wages of sin’ alludes to the secret trauma which secret agent of the Shin Bet, Aviram Dahan, carries with him, about a boy in Megiddo.



*In the preceding episodes, doubt has arisen among the followers of al-Masih upon the news that he was brought up by an illusionist. In addition, he may have been influenced by a radical philosopher with anarchistic tendencies. In addition, Eva finds out that al-Masih has spent some time in a mental asylum. His own brother also gives some information about their upbringing. No doubt, watching these new disclosures foster the impression that al-Masih is nothing but a patient suffering from Messianic phantasies. All this leaves al-Masih undisturbed. He behaves as if all these accusations are part and parcel of his task. Rightly so, as we will see presently in our commentary.*

*In the tenth episode things reach a climax. Although his stay in the USA has been judged legitimate (an important matter given the Trump legislation about Muslims being forbidden to enter the country), the CIA illegally flies al-Masih back to the Middle East. Eva Geller has changed her negative opinion about him, but Aviram Dahan remains suspicious while accompanying al-Masih on his forced flight back. In spite of his nearly-imprisonment, al-Masih converses with Aviram and counsels him to face his trauma about the boy in Megiddo, who, being the son of the man who killed Aviram's mother, has been killed by Aviram. Aviram is told that God loves him, in spite of his own negative view of himself. A flashback makes clear that Aviram has been brought up in a devout Jewish home and has done his bar-mitswa. His cynical attitude may be explained by what happened to his little brother. The boy died in an terrorist attack, which explains Aviram's bitterness. Even now he can choose the good and die with the face of the boy before him. Indeed, the plane gets into severe turbulence and everything becomes dark. Dahan is frightened but al-Masih stays calm. Eva Geller follows the plane on the radar and suspects the Chief of Staff for having organized the crash. A shepherd boy, who admittedly has shown a vivid imagination somewhat earlier, finds the plane in the desert, surrounded by thousands of flowers. Later on the boy tells how al-Masih took Dahan by the hand, bringing him back to life. Another revived passenger honors al-Masih by kissing his hand.*

There is no doubt that we have here a classical cliffhanger. It will, however, not be resolved because for reasons not quite clear (which has given rise to conspiracy theories), Netflix has decided not to continue the series. Again we have the opportunity to determine the close proximity of this episode to the gospel message. Expressing doubts about the Messianic status by pointing at the humble background and even by doubting his mental state is a clear element of Jesus' debate over his identity:

“Where did this man get such wisdom and miraculous powers?” they asked. “Isn't this the carpenter's son? Isn't his mother's name Mary, and aren't his brothers James, Joseph, Simon and Judas?” (Matthew 13:54-55). An even more painful episode in which Jesus' own mother has been involved is documented in Matthew 12: 47-50:

Someone said unto him, Behold, thy mother and thy brethren stand without, desiring to speak with thee. But he answered and said unto him that told him, who is my mother? And who are my brethren? And he stretched forth his hand toward his disciples, and said, behold my mother and my brethren! For whosoever shall do the will of my Father which is in heaven, the same is my brother, and sister, and mother”.

See also Mark 3:21: When his family heard about this, they went to take charge of him, for they said, "He is out of his mind."

Note how the family ties are again relegated to a secondary level and how Jesus challenges his followers to become his brothers and sisters by doing God's will. This is another fine

example of the Messianic rhetoric of confrontation. The change in meaning of what is truth becomes clear in Eva Geller. Her firm conviction that the CIA embodies truth and honesty – she has even turned down an applicant who was less convinced of the absolute truth embodied by the CIA – has been undermined by the illegal deportation of al-Masih. Now she begins to wonder whether there is a higher truth and she begins to see both the CIA and al-Masih in a different light. Apparently two meanings of truth collide here (cp. John 18:36).

As spectators we are left puzzled by the end of the series. Have the people in the plane really died to be resurrected afterwards? This would be a definitive vindication of the Messianic identity of al-Masih. Or do we see someone's dream of what has not happened in reality? Is the flowers part of a paradisiac existence awaiting human beings after death?



But how about Aviram Dahan? Is he an unrepentant sinner and murderer of an innocent boy, comparable to Judas, refusing to be convinced by Jesus' life, message and sacrificial death? Or is he like 'the penitent thief' next to Jesus on the cross, being promised paradise? As to the gospels, its ambiguity about 'bad' persons is not resolved; different options continue to be brought forward in the course of history. Religions will always remain hesitant to condemn a human being unconditionally. Judas and Pilate have been portrayed both as embodiment of evil and as repentant sinners. Compare the portrait of Pharaoh in the Qur'an as repentant sinner or as convicted criminal (Koran 10:90-91). Similarly, the fate of Aviram Dahan will never be disclosed. The same holds good, but for different reasons, for the fate of the other protagonists, especially of al-Masih himself.

Critics may complain about the many open endings: what was the role of the boy Jibril, who is seen practicing a speech to plead for recognition of Palestine, whereas his friend had radicalized? How about the miscarriages of Eva Geller and will there be a future for her and Aviram together? Probably the constraints of a Netflix series rather than a deeper Messianic meaning have caused all these open endings or what is called in literary theory: 'blunt motifs'. For us the Messianic theme has been central and of paramount importance, which will become clear in the conclusion.

## 5. Conclusion

The analogy between al-Masih and the gospels about Jesus is far stronger than one would expect. Apparently, the Messianic portrait of Jesus contains aspects, such as doubts about Jesus' mental health, inability to perform miracles, evasive and enigmatic answers, socially disruptive elements, which are not familiar even to Christians. Because of the resistance this provokes we regard the *Return of Christ while both church and society are unprepared for it* as the main issue of this series. There is a clear criticism of institutional Christianity, as well as of American politics. Likewise Israeli politics is criticized as well, as is fundamentalist Islam.

Without taking a 'New Age position' or postmodern spiritual position transcending existing religions and institutional forms, al-Masih remains recognizable for all three religions, symbolized by his speaking three languages fluently.<sup>3</sup> Hence Al-Masih should not be regarded as an imitation of Jesus, even if the iconic language has been derived from Jesus-films. Islamic Messianic elements and Jewish religious motifs have likewise contributed to the portrayal of al-Masih. The more violent and exclusive aspects of the Messianic expectations as they are present in all three religions, like the destruction of the non-believers facing the dilemma: convert or die, have receded into the background, although both apocalyptic disaster and the call to convert / repent remains paramount. Here the fourth dimension comes in: modern secular society. The sceptic rejection of al-Masih should be distinguished both from the (evangelical) Christian indignation as from the orthodox Islamic rejection. The main opponents of al-Masih, Eva Geller and Aviram Dahan, are seemingly successful and autonomous persons. However, confronted with al-Masih they are reminded of their woundedness and broken relationships. The call to repentance and reconciliation is met with their vehement resistance almost until the end. The totally modern context – al-Masih being the only one not to use mobile phones, radar, and other equipment – strongly enhances the impact of the Messianic message for present-day society.

Our analysis of this series should be considered theological rather than esthetic. An evaluation of the technical qualities of the series is outside our scope. Still we think that our analysis has shown that there is much more in this series than meets the eye. Without a thorough knowledge of the three monotheistic religions this series could not have been made. The impossibility to remain an indifferent or impartial bystander strongly contributes to the grip of the series upon the spectator. The way people interpret The Messiah reveals as much about themselves as about The Messiah. This effect is even enhanced further by the many silent moments in which the spectator is confronted with al-Masih, (like Dostoevski's Grand inquisitor with a silent Christ), but no less with his / her own inner life.

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<sup>3</sup> The main weakness of the impressive Netflix series *The Spy*, with a star role for Sacha Baron Cohen, is that there is no Arabic spoken.



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